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Our Fathers of New England.—Religion their ruling motive in
their emigration.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON THE LORD'S DAY,

DECEMBER 22d, 1850, V

THE

TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

LANDING OF THE PILGRIMS.

BY SAMUEL W. S. DUTTON,
PASTOR OF THE NORTH CHURCH, NEW HAVEN, CT.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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A. H. MALTBY, No. 67 CHAPEL STREET.

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S E R M O N.

"Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt; thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it; and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs to the sea and her branches to the river."—PSALM LXXX, 8-11.

THIS is the twenty-second day of December—the month, and the day, on which, in the year 1620, God led his pious servants, the pioneers in the settlement of New England, to the rock of Plymouth. So predominant was the religious character of that movement of the fathers of New England, and so beneficent have been its results in their bearing on the kingdom of Christ in the world, that the consideration of it is very appropriate to the services of the Sanctuary; and so rare is the conjunction of the Sabbath with this anniversary, justly revered by all true New England men, that I should fail suitably to regard the openings and indications of Providence, did I not turn your minds to-day in the direction of that great event, and the events associated with it in the early settlement of this country.

The *cause* of this movement, the cause of the emigration, of the colonists who came to Plymouth in 1620, of those who came to Salem on Massachusetts Bay in 1628, of those who came to Boston and its vicinity in 1630, of those who came to Hartford and Saybrook in 1635, of those who came to New Haven in 1638, and of the hundreds and thousands who followed them during a few years after—the chief cause of this emigration was *religious*. They came to this new

and wild country, in the face of great perils and sufferings, that they might here enjoy liberty to worship God, and to promote piety according to the dictates of an enlightened conscience—liberty which was denied them in England—which they could not exercise there without suffering severe punishments.

This position is very important, if we would rightly estimate the character of the early New Englanders. It is one, which, being entirely accordant with the truth of history, we should insist upon ; for it has become quite common in some quarters, either boldly to deny it, or to pass it by slightly ; so that there seems to be some danger that it will be overlooked or altogether set aside. On the one hand, some writers, who sympathize with the church of England which persecuted our fathers, are accustomed plainly to deny that they were persecuted at all ; and on the other hand, some orators, who care more for civil polity than for religion, and more for civil than for religious freedom, are accustomed to eulogize our fathers as the special apostles of civil liberty or republicanism, as though that was their first and chief object. But no truth is more completely established by history, than that *religion* was the chief end for which they sought this wilderness ; and that they cared for civil freedom chiefly as a means to the freedom of religion. On this point, Daniel Webster has well remarked—" Of the motives which induced the first settlers to seek an asylum in this then unexplored wilderness, the first and principal, no doubt, were connected with religion. They sought to enjoy a higher degree of religious freedom, and what they esteemed a purer form of religious worship, than was allowed to their choice, or presented to their imitation, in the old world." And probably no other motive than this would have given them such enterprise, courage, and endurance. If they had been mere republicans, instead of zealous and conscientious Christians, they never would have dared, endured, and done what they did. For

the same writer well adds, “The love of religious liberty is a stronger sentiment, when fully excited, than an attachment to civil or political freedom. That freedom which the conscience demands, and which men feel bound by their hopes of salvation to contend for, can hardly fail to be attained. Conscience in the cause of religion, and the worship of the deity prepares the mind to act and to suffer beyond almost all other causes. It sometimes gives an impulse so irresistible that no fetters of power or opinion can withstand it. * . * * Human invention has devised nothing, human power has compassed nothing that can forcibly restrain it when it breaks forth. Nothing can stop it, but to give way to it. Nothing can check it but indulgence. It loses its power only when it has attained its object. * * * If it be allowed indulgence and expansion, like the elemental fires, it only agitates and purifies the atmosphere, while its efforts to throw off restraint would burst the world asunder.”

The historical proof that religious persecution drove our fathers from Old to New England—that they came hither from a desire for the freedom and prosperity of religion—cannot be fully presented in a whole discourse, much less in a single department of a discourse. A glance at the proof is all that the present limits will allow. And such a glance will be sufficient for those who are at all familiar with history.

The Reformation in England, the seeds of which were sown by Wickliffe a hundred and fifty years before Luther’s time, and which received its final form and shape in the reign of Elizabeth, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, it is well known was incomplete. While it extended with some thoroughness to the doctrines of the church of England, reducing them to the form in which they are set forth in the thirty-nine articles of that church, it affected only partially the discipline, government and liturgy, which retained many Romish features, deemed by many members of that church very objectionable. For this reason there was a portion of

that church, highly respectable in number, and eminent in piety and learning, who favored a further reformation. These were called *Puritans*. Among these were many who, from conscientious scruples, declined compliance with the more superstitious and hurtful remnants of the Romish worship and discipline. These were called *Nonconformists*. During the reign of Elizabeth, those ministers who declined to conform to these objectionable rules or customs of the church were liable to be, and many of the most useful and able were, silenced and deprived of all their employments. But, in 1603, on the accession of James 1st, who was educated in Scotland and professed to be a zealous Presbyterian, the Puritans hoped that reforms in the church would be made. But in this they were entirely disappointed. While James was on his way to take possession of the throne, a petition was presented to him, signed by nearly a thousand ministers of the church of England, praying for the reformation of certain abuses of the church. The result was a conference, during which James said he "would make them conform, or harry them out of the land, or hang them." Soon a law was passed to the effect that whosoever should say anything against the authority, government, or customs of the church of England, or should separate from that church, or allow that there was any other real church in England, should be excommunicated, and, in consequence, should be incapable of collecting his just dues, might be imprisoned till such time as he should make satisfaction to the church, and when he died, should be denied Christian burial. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Bancroft, with the approbation of the king, adopted many measures on purpose to oppress the Puritans, and to sift them out of the church; insisting on the strict observance of all the saints' days and festivals of the church, and on the use of all the objectionable articles of dress which were associated in the minds of the people with Popery; and obliging the clergy to sign the articles over again,

with an additional avowal "that they did it from the heart." Under his operations, in the year 1604, three hundred Puritan ministers, who had not separated from the established church, were silenced, imprisoned, or exiled. If any one even petitioned for any reformation, he could be fined at pleasure, and was liable to be arraigned, as many in fact were, for felony or treason. At one time the whole body of the clergy of London were summoned "to subscribe over again," but such numbers refused that the churches were in danger of being "disfurnished." In twenty-four counties, there were seven hundred and forty-six of the clergy who refused to conform; and it was estimated that, by these measures, from thirteen to fifteen hundred of the ministers in the kingdom, were forced into nonconformity. As a specimen of the persecution which the Puritans were called to endure, take these familiar instances—William Prynne, a lawyer, for writing a book against plays, masques, balls, and other things of the kind, was excluded from his profession, was sentenced to stand in the pillory, to lose both his ears, to pay a fine of five thousand pounds, and to suffer imprisonment for life. A physician, for having published a book which denied the divine right of bishops, as an order superior to presbyters, was sentenced to be excluded from his profession, to be excommunicated, to be fined a thousand pounds, and to be imprisoned till he should recant. Dr. Alexander Leighton, a Scotch divine, the father of the excellent Archbishop Leighton, for having published a book against prelacy or episcopacy, was sentenced, by the secret and despotic court of the Star Chamber, to pay a fine of ten thousand pounds, to be repeatedly set in the pillory, to be repeatedly and publicly whipped, to have the features of his face horribly mutilated, to be branded in the face with an S S, signifying sower of sedition, and to be closely imprisoned for life.*

* The following account of the treatment of Dr. Leighton, is from the Life of his son, Archbishop Leighton.

"He was arrested early in 1629, hurried to a wretched cell in Newgate, low, damp,

But the religious persecution which caused the fathers of New England to leave their native country, cannot be better illustrated than by a reference to the history of the very church of the Pilgrims, which, two hundred and thirty years ago to-day, landed on Plymouth Rock. That church was organized in the northern part of England, in the year 1602. It was the result of what we should term, in these days, a revival of religion. According to the account of Gov. Bradford, one of the Plymouth colonists, under the preaching of some godly and zealous ministers of the church of England in that region many were awakened and converted. But as soon as the work of God in them was manifest by their reformation, they were scoffed and scorned by the profane multitude; their ministers were urged to conform, and if they did

and without light, except what was admitted, along with the rain, from an aperture in the roof, overrun with rats and other vermin. Here he lay from Tuesday night till Thursday at noon, without food, and for fourteen days endured solitary confinement in this miserable hole; while his house, in his absence, was rifled, his books destroyed, and his papers carried off. After sixteen weeks' captivity, he was served with an information of the crimes with which he was charged, but he was sick and unable to attend, and from the nature of his disorder, a fitter object of compassion than punishment, for the skin and hair had almost wholly come off his body.

" Yet though thus afflicted, this aged, infirm divine, was condemned to a punishment the stouter russian could hardly have endured, which some of the lords of the court conceived could never be inflicted on a dying man, and was only held out as a terror to others: it was—to be degraded as a minister, to have his ears cut off, his nose slit, to be branded in the face, to stand in the pillory, to be whipped at a post, to pay a fine of £10,000, and to suffer imprisonment till it was paid; the whieh when Archbishop Laud heard pronounced, he pulled off his hat, and holding up his hands, gave thanks to God, who had given the church victory over her enemies !

" And it was mercilessly inflicted. On the 29th of November, in a cold frosty day, he was stripped, and received thirty-six lashes with a trible cord, after which he stood during a snow storm two hours half naked on the pillory at Westminister, was branded on one cheek with a red-hot iron, had one ear cut off, and one side of his nose slit: On that day se'ennight, ere his sores were healed, he was taken to the pillory in Cheapside, and underwent the remainder of his sentence. He was then earried baek to prison, and shut in for upwards of ten years until the meeting of the Long Parliament: when released from his miserable confinement, he could hardly walk, see, or hear. The Parliament reversed all the proeceedings against him, and voted him six thousand pounds for his great sufferings and damages, and in 1642 gave him an appointment."

All this for publishing an argument against the episcopacy of the church of England !

not, were silenced ; and the people were so harrassed by police officers and commission courts, as to be greatly distressed. At length they began, by the light of God's word, to see and feel that they ought not to endure such tyranny, and to be so hindered in their Christian life. They, therefore, in the language of Bradford's journal, "shook off this yoke of anti-christian bondage, (separated themselves from the church of England,) and, as the Lord's free people, joined themselves by a covenant of the Lord, in a church-estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all the ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatever it should cost them." In other words, they formed a Congregational Church. This was in 1602. On account of its great increase, and the widely scattered abodes of its members, this church was ere long divided into two. That one of these two churches, which ultimately came to New England, had for its pastors, Richard Clifton, a learned, venerable, and fatherly old man ; and John Robinson, a man of great courage joined to great meekness and humility—a man of distinguished ability, learning, industry, candor, honesty, and piety—a man, says one of his enemies, "of excellent parts, and the most polished and modest spirit that ever separated from the church of England." Their teacher and ruling elder was William Brewster, a man of high rank, who had held offices of great trust under the government in his early years, a man distinguished for character and capacity, for piety and distinguished zeal. This church were so hunted and persecuted on every side, that they could not continue in England. Some were seized and imprisced ; others had their houses watched night and day, and with difficulty escaped. Most were glad to flee, leaving their houses and means of support. At length, after enduring six years of this intolerable persecution, they resolved to emigrate to Holland ; because they were informed that there was "freedom of religion for all

men ;" and notwithstanding they knew that they would be sojourners in a strange land, among a people of a strange speech, and would be obliged to gain a precarious livelihood by modes of industry of which they were ignorant. But their persecutors are unwilling to let them escape. The ports and harbors are closed against them. They are obliged to hire mariners, at exorbitant prices, to come to unfrequented places and take them away by night. They are taken aboard, and then betrayed, according to an agreement of the shipmaster with their enemies; are put into open boats and rudely and indecently searched; are taken back into the town as a gazing stock; are stripped of money, books, and goods, arraigned before the magistrates, and committed to prison.

The greater part having been released in the course of a month, they soon make another attempt to escape to Holland. They form an engagement with a shipmaster from Holland, to take them in at a distance from any town. The women, children, and goods are sent to the place in a small bark. The men go by land. The ship arrives—though a day after the appointed time, during which the little company were crowded together, men, women, and children, with their baggage, on an open, barren heath, exposed to severe cold and driving rain—and a boat is sent to take off part of the men. They are no sooner aboard than a great company of armed men rush upon those who remain, and take them prisoners, and also the women and children, whose bark had got aground; and the ship master, in fear, makes sail with the portion whom he has taken aboard. They, after encountering a violent storm for seven days with imminent danger of shipwreck, are landed in Holland, without money or change of clothing, separated from their wives and children, and the men associated with them: who, after being dismissed from the custody of the officers of justice, were at a distance from home, without shelter, protection or friends. But to relate how they were at length united in Holland would occupy too much time.

"As this scene passes before us (says an eloquent orator*) we can hardly forbear asking, whether this be a band of malefactors and felons flying from justice? What are their crimes that they hide themselves in darkness? To what punishment are they exposed, that to avoid it, men, women and children thus encounter the surf of the North Sea, and the terrors of a night storm? What induces this armed pursuit, and this arrest of fugitives of all ages and sexes? Truth does not allow us to answer these inquiries in a manner that does credit to the wisdom or justice of the times. This was not the flight of guilt but of virtue. It was an humble and peaceable religion flying from causeless oppression. It was conscience, attempting to escape from the arbitrary rule of the Stuarts. It was Robinson, and Brewster, leading off their little band to find shelter on the shores of a neighboring continent."

It has been the disingenuous policy of those whose prejudices and associations lead them to depreciate the Puritans, and to asperse their motives, perseveringly to confound the principles for which they suffered, with some of those trivial occasions and tests in which they might have yielded compliance, perhaps, without any infidelity to conscience. It is not denied that there were those among them who took unnecessary occasions for non-conformity. But the testimony of innumerable witnesses among the friends and enemies of divine right in Church and State, makes it one of the plainest truths of history, that real liberty of conscience did not exist in England at this time; and that a multitude of her sons, among the noblest in mind and truest in heart, were severely persecuted for conscience' sake, and "for righteousness' sake." To deny, as some do, in the face of a multitude of such facts as have been just stated, that there was any persecution of the Puritans, and to assert that they left home, country and

* Daniel Webster.

friends because they would not preach in a surplice, or make the sign of the cross in baptism, or marry with a ring, is to falsify the plainest facts in history, and to defame those of whom the world was not worthy. It was for *the supremacy of God's will, and of the human conscience*—the principles for which Baxter and Bunyan, Leighton and Prynne, and an army of martyrs suffered in mind, body and estate; which Milton so boldly avowed, and in such majestic words vindicated and sustained—it was for these principles that our forefathers broke every tie that made home and country dear, and not for any philosophical abstraction, nor for any narrow and bigoted superstition.

I am aware that the facts related in this discourse have become in some degree familiar to the well informed. For the researches of the historians of our day have done much to reveal the touching story of the wrongs and hardships, the heroism and patience of our beloved ancestors. But in these days, when the principles which led them to such acts of courage and self sacrifice, are assailed with fresh vigor; and the doctrines which they justly hated and opposed even unto exile and death are asserted anew; it becomes us to study their example with new diligence, and to ponder the lessons of their most instructive history.*

The founders of these New England colonies abundantly declare (and their conduct verifies their words) that they came here for the sake of *religion*—came here, because they had not in their own beloved home freedom to worship God, and to promote his kingdom according to their honest judgment of his will—came here to have Christian liberty and rest; and came, not only to enjoy religion themselves, but to extend

* If any wish to see full proof of the truth of the historical statements in this discourse, respecting the persecution of the Puritans, and the religious motives which actuated them in their departure from England, let them consult Bradford's Journal, Young's Chronicles of the Pilgrims, Neale's History of the Puritans, Macaulay's History of England, and Bancroft's History of the United States, Vol. 1.

the kingdom of Christ in its purity and power. Yes, the founding of these New England commonwealths was the work of *devoted piety*. It was a movement such as the world has never seen of *Christian* enterprise, wisdom and heroism. Those colonists were eminent servants of God, seeking a sphere where they might freely do his will. And God's hand was plainly seen, guiding, sustaining and blessing them. That hand was especially seen, directing the weather-beaten Mayflower—unable now to survive another gale, with no pilot acquainted with the rock bound coast, or its channels and roadsteads—leading her to almost the only place where she could safely come—within that cape, which seemed to have extended its mighty arm of rock and sand, on purpose to encircle and protect her.

There was an incident before the landing of the Pilgrims, which well illustrates the firmness and strength of their religious principle. “It was the beginning of winter, on that bleak shore. They were now to find a landing place. The boat was unshipped, but it needed repairs, and sixteen weary days elapsed before it was ready for service. Amid ice and snow, it was then sent out, with some half dozen pilgrims, to find a suitable place to land. The spray of the sea froze on them, and made their clothes like iron. Five days they wandered about, searching in vain for a suitable landing place. A storm came on; the snow and the rain fell; the sea swelled; the rudder broke; the mast and sail fell overboard. In this storm and cold, without a tent, a house, or the shelter of a rock, the Christian Sabbath approached—the day which they regarded as holy unto God—a day on which they were not to “do any work.” What should be done? As the evening before the Sabbath drew on, they pushed over the surf, entered a fair sound, sheltered themselves under the lee of a rise of land, kindled a fire, and on that little island they spent the day in the solemn worship of their Maker. On the next day their feet touched the rock—the sacred landing place of the Pilgrims.”

The chief object which I had in view is now accomplished, viz: to show, or rather to remind you, that the great motive which brought our forefathers to New England was a *religious* one. They left a home very dear to them, because they were not free there to obey God. They came through manifold perils and hardships, to the perils and hardships of an untried wilderness and among heathen savages, that they might freely obey God; might cultivate their own piety in peace; and might found institutions whose main object should be to secure and promote religion in its purity and power, to hand it down to posterity, and to extend it in the earth. *Civil liberty was with them the means to an end: which end was religious freedom and prosperity.* That they should have organized republican government was not strange, after they had formed Congregational churches: for a Congregational church is a model of a republic.

It would be well, if there was time, to dwell upon the intellectual character of the early New Englanders in the various colonies; and remind you that they were men not only eminent in piety, but eminent, many of them, in culture and learning; fitted to shine with equal luster among the intellectual luminaries of any land. It would be well to consider the foundations and institutions which they laid and established here; the provision which they made, first of all, for the purity, prosperity, and permanency of religion; the provision which they made for the education of all the people, by schools—wedding together schools and churches; and the provision which they made for the more finished education of those who should practice in the learned professions, especially in the ministry—provision made by them at great sacrifice, in establishing and sustaining colleges.

It would be pleasant, also, if there was time, to glance at the *results* of the heroic and Christian enterprize of our fathers, who founded these colonies—at the change which has taken place here in two hundred and thirty years—at the

magnificent growth to which their feeble and painful, but wise beginnings have attained. [Surely it must gladden their hearts to look down and behold it!] But you are familiar with pictures of our country, extending from ocean to ocean ; fast filling up with descendants of the early settlers, and with refugees from the oppression, poverty, and fearful social inequalities of the old world—a land abounding in churches, and schools, and colleges—a land all glorious, except one dark spot, with freedom—a land, which, though cursed with many forms and degrees of wickedness, is nevertheless more nearly under the dominion of Christ than any other—a land, the glory of whose future, if God forsake us not, surpasses the power of any prophet-poet to foretell or portray.

It will be better for us, however, to occupy the few moments which remain, in considering some lessons which the subject teaches.

We should be grateful to God for such an ancestry.

They were indeed noblemen in Christ's kingdom, heroes in the Christian army, God's chosen instruments in conferring countless blessings upon the world, and especially upon us. What we are and enjoy as a people; what we do for the benefit of the world by the far shining light of illustrious example, and by the power of active and voluntary endeavors ; is owing, under God, to them. Such a parentage is the noblest and most beneficent of all inheritances. To think of such fathers, the meditation on their virtues and deeds of holy heroism, and on their parental relations to us, is a continual fountain of beneficent influence upon our hearts and lives. They seem to stand among us, venerable, godly, and benevolent men ; and with paternal faithfulness and love, to rebuke our faults, and encourage our virtues. They were men of prayer. Their prayers often went up for their country and their posterity. Those prayers surround us, even now—a wall of defence from evil, perennial conductors of

good. May God give us grace ever to be grateful to him for our inheritance in such a parentage.

But in order to be thus grateful for our ancestry, we must cultivate reverence for them, and a just appreciation of them.

We shall not otherwise be duly grateful for this inheritance. We should be studious of their history, and familiar with their trials, their struggles, their persecutions, their mighty works, and their Christian virtues. We should, in a proper manner, but effectually, meet those denials of their peculiar merits, and those aspersions on their character, which the envy and prejudice of ungenerous and unjust sectarianism have made so common. We should cherish the memory of their worth, so that the consciousness of our alliance with their excellence will ever operate with power to elevate, ennable and sanctify us. We should embalm their sublime virtues in story and eloquence, in poetry, painting and sculpture. We should mark and adorn their graves with appropriate monuments. We should not, indeed, be blind to their faults, lest we imitate them. For there is a loyalty to truth, higher and better than any loyalty to friends or even to parents. They had, indeed, manifest faults. But these faults were, for the most part, the *universal faults of the times*, and were less in them than in most others. They were, in the most important features of improvement, far in advance of their age. They are truly and eminently worthy of our admiration and reverence. There can be no surer sign of our degeneracy, no surer precursor of our downfall, than a lack of reverence and affection for an ancestry like our *Pilgrim Fathers*.

The lesson ought also to come home to our hearts, diligently to cherish such institutions as they established.

Churches, free-schools, well endowed colleges—let us see to it that these are maintained in vigor and excellence within our more immediate sphere of influence. And, widely as our aid can reach through our land, especially in the more

newly organized and more destitute commonwealths which are stretching on towards the Pacific, let us establish churches, schools and colleges, for the intellectual, moral, and Christian culture of the whole nation. This is the Puritan policy and wisdom.

Finally, let us learn to imitate the virtues of our fathers.

Let us not be like the proud but degenerate Jews, who built the tombs of the prophets, and honored their memory, yet practised the very iniquities which the prophets denounced, and neglected the duties which the prophets enjoined. Our fathers were chiefly anxious for the honor of Christ and the prosperity of his kingdom. For this they could dare and do anything. Let us imitate their example. They had a fear of God above all other fear. They were, indeed, good subjects of human government; teaching subjection to "the higher powers;" never forcibly resisting human authority, except in cases of justifiable revolution. *But they maintained the supremacy of God's law, and the supremacy of conscience.* They would undergo any penalty rather than do anything which God forbids; they would suffer any punishment rather than neglect to do, under any human prohibition, what God commands. And, surely, it will not be amiss for us to study and imitate, in this respect, also, their example. They had a regard for religion which far transcended their regard for civil affairs. In that too we need to study and follow their example; for herein truly we fall far behind it. They had a love for Christ which was far above their love for the world, far above all their loves. May it be so with us! May the God of our fathers let fall upon us the mantle of our fathers, so that we shall be their true children, and he shall be our God!



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